

# Romney Had It Easier When He Had a Primary

Lincoln Mitchell, Harriman Institute, Columbia University

Posted: 05/ 2/2012 12:57 pm

It was only a month or two ago when Republican pundits voiced concerns that a long primary season would damage Mitt Romney for the general election. The long primary season, largely because of the failure of any Republican candidate other than Romney to put together a serious campaign, never occurred. Instead, almost a month ago, before many states had voted, Romney solidified his status as his party's presumptive nominee.

Romney has been free for almost a month now to campaign against Barack Obama in the general election. Not surprisingly, campaigning against a gifted and experienced politician like President Obama has proven more difficult than debating Rick Santorum or trying to raise more money than Newt Gingrich. While Romney may now have more time to shake up his Etch A Sketch and reintroduce himself to the American people, he also must work hard to keep himself and his campaign in the news. Other than speculation about who Romney will choose as his running mate, there is almost nothing about the Romney campaign now which will generate interest from the media. This is a contrast with Obama, who is still president, and so is able to generate news and media coverage very easily.

If the Republican primary were still going on, Romney would, to be sure, still be getting attacked for his insufficiently right-wing background, but he would be able to begin moving to the center by contrasting himself with Santorum or Gingrich while still making some news for regularly winning primaries. A weekly drubbing of a right-wing fringe candidate would help Romney position himself back in the center, but without that, Romney's campaign is a bit at sea, with no real means for keeping people's attention.

Additionally, without the Republican primary to structure Romney's campaign, Romney has, at least temporarily, lost the ability to set the agenda for the campaign. This week, for example, Romney has spent his time criticizing the president for taking some credit for the policies that led to the killing of Osama bin Laden while trying to convince voters that he too would have done the same thing. Whether or not Romney would have gone after bin Laden had he been president is less significant than the reality that Obama has backed Romney into a spot where he has to defend himself in this way.

Romney is in a similar position on the economy, where the days of easily demonstrating his superior knowledge of economic matter against people like Herman Cain, who had a three word answer, "nine, nine, nine," for seemingly every economic problem; Gingrich, whose economic proposals often took a nasty, if somewhat wacky, direction, including his proposal to put low-income children to work as custodians in their schools; and Santorum, who seemed to answer

every economic question with a rant about the evils of contraception, abortion or marriage equality, are gone. Instead, Romney has an opponent who, while vulnerable due to the slow economic recovery, is able to speak fluently on the issues and point to a record of some accomplishment.

Similarly, the latest round of attacks on Romney seeking to portray him as a rich, uncaring businessperson with little interest in, or ability to relate to, ordinary Americans are not unusual, but because they are now coming from President Obama, rather than a poorly funded minor candidate like Santorum, Gingrich or any of the other Republican aspirants, these ads are much more effective.

In the heat of even a not-very-competitive primary there are always those who decry the process as damaging to the party, but we are seeing now that this is not always true. Had Romney experienced a long and genuinely competitive primary, he would have been able to spend April and May sharpening his campaign skills and staying in the media. Presidential campaigns are long, but they also require a rhythm and pace. Currently, with the primary season over, and the election itself a few months away, this rhythm is difficult for Romney to master. For the incumbent, this is less of a problem because Obama can begin to merge his campaign with his presidency relatively smoothly, but Romney has no similar approach at his disposal.

It is critical for Romney that he use these months to continue to define himself to broader swaths of the American electorate, but, by failing to break through with a compelling reason for voters to pay attention to him, Romney has allowed Obama to do this instead. During the primaries, Romney consistently sought to present himself, with some success, as the voice of reason and maturity in a crowded Republican field. Now, because Gingrich, Santorum, and Romney's other foils are gone, Obama is the one defining Romney -- but as the out-of-touch rich guy who tied his dog to the roof of his car and who might or might not have gone after bin Laden. For Romney, this is much worse than drubbing Santorum or Ron Paul in a few states every week.